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*Policies and Benefits*

# Information Security: protect your Personally Identifiable Information

As part of their job duties, some TDCJ employees have access to confidential information about agency staff or offenders. Keeping this information secure and out of the wrong hands is an important part of the agency's mission, but the history of successful computer hacks over the last few years might make you think that nothing on the web is safe from criminals.


Last year's Equifax data breach, which compromised the security of more than 145 million credit reports and related personal information, was just the latest in a long line of hacks. Over the last few years, cybercriminals around the world have gained unauthorized access to the personal information of hundreds of millions of user accounts held by an assortment of groups including social media and professional networks, health care insurance providers and online gamers. Even possessing a simple store credit card could put your information at risk.

It's important to understand how confidential data is protected when shared with organizations and what you can do to protect yourself. Your social and financial reputations are closely tied to this personal information and recovery from such an event can be extremely difficult, which has led to the adoption of laws requiring strict safeguards over the storage and use of Personally Identifiable Information, or PII.

PII applies to any confidential information that can be used to learn your identity: your full name, age, date of birth, gender, driver's license number or other numerical identifier such as a Social Security Number, as well as your home or e-mail address.

It is TDCJ's responsibility to make sure your PII and any other confidential information in its possession are protected as stipulated in Texas Administrative Code, and things like software security programs, password-protected data access and cybercrime awareness training help prevent hackers from gaining unauthorized access to this data. Since the agency also handles confidential criminal justice information that can include an offender's PII, we are under strict rules regarding storage, transmission and usage of this information. The best ways for agency employees to protect TDCJ data is to be familiar with the agency's Information Resource Security Program, and follow the security program's stipulations and guidelines to avoid releasing confidential information.

To help protect your own confidential information, you must be proactive and closely monitor your credit report for unanticipated changes. You can request one free copy of your credit report from each of the major credit bureaus - Equifax, Experian, TransUnion, and Innovis - each year. If you find incorrect information, contact whichever credit bureau created the report to fix the issue. If your personal information is compromised, request that a fraud alert be implemented on your credit file so you will be notified of any suspicious activity.

If you think your PII might have been hacked and your identity is in jeopardy, contact the credit bureaus and request a security freeze on your credit file. The fee for placing a security freeze commonly ranges from $5 to $10, and freezing an account will stop any inquiries regarding your credit from unfamiliar organizations, but will not affect groups with whom you already do business and have previously reported on your file, such as the bank that maintains your credit card. Later, if you want to establish credit with a new lender, you can arrange to have the credit bureau reactivate your file. More information about security freezes is available on the Federal Trade Commission's Credit Freeze FAQ.

For additional peace of mind, you can subscribe to an identity monitoring service, but be sure you thoroughly research the company before you commit, and always use strong and unique passwords or passphrases for each online account; a password manager application can be useful to help you keep track of this information. ▲